

### The cybernetic self and its discontents: care and self-care in the information society

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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version  
Sammelwerksbeitrag / collection article

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Traue, B. (2010). The cybernetic self and its discontents: care and self-care in the information society. In A. D. Bührmann, & S. Ernst (Eds.), *Care or control of the self? Norbert Elias, Michel Foucault, and the subject in the 21st century* (pp. 158-178). Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publ. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-284713>

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Boris Traue: *The Cybernetic Self and its Discontents: Care and Self-Care in the Information Society*. In: Bührmann, Andrea and Stefanie Ernst (ed.): *Control or Care of the Self*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing. pp. 158-178.

## THE CYBERNETIC SELF AND ITS DISCONTENTS: CARE AND SELF-CARE IN THE INFORMATION SOCIETY

BORIS TRAUUE

Contemporary Western societies are characterized by the spreading of practices of self-care. This can be observed in a number of developments: a heightened attention to the body in everyday life and consumption, the rise of practices designed to improve oneself, the ongoing privatisation and individualisation of lives in affluent societies, an increasing range of institutions and industries occupied with the production of health products, advice and guidance. Taking care of oneself in an intensified manner — as a cultural pattern — has been associated with a radicalised individualism in the sense of a “narcissistic preoccupation with the self”, as Christopher Lasch proposes in his at the time instantly famous 1979 study (Lasch 1979: 21). In the tradition of a psychoanalytically inspired cultural criticism (Fromm 1956, Marcuse 1964), to which Lasch refers, even though he is not part of the Frankfurt tradition, vitriolic criticism is directed against a perceived loss of a collectivistic political subject caused by consumerism and the loss of historical consciousness: “To live for the moment is the prevailing passion — to live for yourself, not for your predecessors or posterity.” (Lasch 1979: 5). Lasch attributes this loss of past and future mainly to the hedonistic and therapeutic culture of the 1970s, whereas Fromm and Marcuse see consumerism, cultural industry and technology in general as the culprit, in their capacity to provide ready-made identities and seemingly instantaneous satisfaction of ready-made desires. “Repressive de-sublimation” is Marcuse’s widely influential term for a “de-erotisation” of the social world (Marcuse 93f). Norbert Elias exposes a more melancholic and at the same time mundane perspective on the problem of self-care. For him, increased control of our bodies and

expressions is the price we pay for a less intense central government and the vastly increased *interdependence* of modern citizens. He is to be given credit for discovering that a structurally induced modern orientation toward one's own behaviour gives rise to new forms of knowledge with its specific objects: "experience" and the "psyche".<sup>1</sup> Richard Sennett constructs a different genealogy of narcissism, albeit with similar consequences: the decline of the public sphere leads to a decline of the playfulness of social interaction and in consequence to a "psychologisation of structures of domination" rooted in the sentiment of the narcissistic character (Sennett 1974: 423, 421).

At a second glance, these diagnoses offer quite contradictory account of (post)modern individualism. Even Lasch, perhaps the most unrelenting critic of narcissism, concedes that anti-institutional distrust of those in power "may furnish the basis of a new capacity for self-government, which would end by doing away with the need that gives rise to a governing class in the first place" (Lasch 1979: 20). This contradiction in diagnosis and thus prognosis will not be resolved in the line of discussion which reaches from the early Frankfurt school to the American studies of character.

The intuition to be pursued in the following is that this contradiction remains unresolved because not enough attention has been paid to the means and media by which the relations to oneself and to the other are organised, or more precisely: the conditions for serialities and singularities of self-care. Every self-relation is *serial*, part of a long series of institutionalised knowledge based practices, but it can also be *singular*, when it is an innovative act breaking up the patterns of consumption, exchange, and hierarchy.

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<sup>1</sup> He describes this formation of categories of the 'human sciences' in the last chapter of the 'civilizing process': „Like conduct generally, the perception of things and people also becomes affectively more neutral in the course of the civilizing process. The "world picture" gradually becomes less determined by human wishes and fears and more strongly orientated to what we call "experience" or "the empirical", to sequences with their own immanent regularities. [...] It was particularly in the circles of court life that what we would today call a "psychological" human self-image developed, a more precise observation of others and oneself in terms of longer series of motives and causal connections, because it was there that vigilant self-control and perpetual observation of others were among the elementary prerequisites for the preservation of one's social position" (Elias 2000: 400).

By means or media I do not only refer to the media of communication and exchange which give structure to the circulation of discourses, identities, and affects, but also to the means and media of writing *about* narcissism and self-care. Subjectivity cannot be theorized in an objectifying manner, from the position of a detached observer, precisely because this stance of the observer is part of the problem which the literature on postmodern disidentification, desubjection and narcissism is seeking to address.

More recent analyses of subjectivation have taken into account the technological conditions of subjectivation: Bernard Stiegler directs attention to the technological formation of ‘*attention*’, which becomes “reduced to the automatic operating of tertiary retentions [Stiegler’s terminology for image-consciousness]”, by which primary and secondary retentions, i.e. the functioning of individual and historical memory are “eliminated”, thereby disturbing or even obliterating the long cycles of *sublimation* (Stiegler 2008: 163). In a similar vein, the Austrian psychoanalyst and media theorist Robert Pfaller question the popular assumption of the ‘interactivity’ of the new media and a corresponding ‘activation’ of the subject. He in turn claims that contemporary culture is better characterised by a *delegation* of pleasure and an ensuing loss of playfulness which is escalated by the new media. He calls this condition “interpassivity” (Pfaller 2002: 36ff): “The method of interpassivity consists thus in the supplementation of certain actions by others and in the execution of ersatz actions. This is what constitutes the relation between an absent interpassive person and his solitarily humming videorecorder: The recorder watches tv for the absent person, because he has programmed it (or instructed somebody to do so)” (Pfaller 2002: 37, my translation).

Taking these cues, my hypothesis is that an analysis of the conditions and consequences of self-care as a practice and mode of socialisation requires a consideration of the materiality and mediality of the practices we seek to describe and assess, in order to gain an analytic distinction between different forms of self-care, and the degree to which they are — or are at least susceptible to — mechanisms of *control*. Digital media enhance self-care, and at the same time, they can destroy it. I will end by claiming that self-care is an *impossible possibility*. In a sociological perspective, the task would be to describe the social and technological conditions which enable modes of non-narcissistic and non-toxic self-care.

I will proceed in three steps:

Firstly, I will expose some of the difficulties in interpreting contemporary regimes of subjectivation in regard to labour.

Secondly, the inquiry into self-care as a contemporary mode of subjectivation and social will be exposed by interpreting Michel Foucault's analysis of self-care in antiquity on the background of Derrida's notion of event.

Thirdly, self-care as a practice of truth-telling will be related then to contemporary media regimes and their modes of control.

Finally, I will draw some conclusions regarding the conditions for a possible realisation of self-care as a care of the other.

## Subjectivation and the care of the self

The German debate on the 'subjectivation of labour' has shed light on an implicit paradox of contemporary subjectivity. The 'subjectivation' of labour, understood in everyday practices as an erasure of the boundaries between 'life' and work, has been diagnosed on the one hand as a 'normative subjectivation' (Baethge 1991), a demand articulated by individuals in a kind of *defense of* or *claim to* subjectivity. But it is on the other hand also an organisational and economic demand, aiming at an *intensification* and *escalation* of the relation between labour and 'life' in order to valorise creativity and affect, leaving workers vulnerable to a 'deepened' commodification of their labour.

This paradox of internalization of labour conflict has been articulated in the German debate theoretically in the figure of the "Arbeitskraftunternehmer", i.e. the "entrepreneur" (Voß and Pongratz 1998). In the process of the subjectivation of labor, life itself becomes the object of valuation, not left within the less-regulated domain of use-value, but injected into the domain of circulation by treating it as exchange value. This becoming-knowledge and becoming-object of life itself in the labour process upsets traditional dichotomies and boundaries: production becomes a form of consumption, whereas consumption can become labourious; life becomes labour-intensive, as Arlie Hochschild has demonstrated (Hochschild 1997). This paradox given by the liberation of labour from the fordist disciplinary context and its self-disciplining or self-controlling effects have not been resolved in the 'subjectivation of labour' debate; one path chosen to process the paradox and to understand the 'labours', or the grievances, of the subjectified labourer is a socio-structural analysis: in higher social strata, the promise of subjectivation is

more fulfilled than in other, lower strata. Such analyses effectively reveal the ideological character of the activating labor market policies without addressing the question whether new political subjects or even collectivities or can arise from subjectified labor processes. The enterprising self, as analyzed by Nikolas Rose (1998), Andrea Bührmann (2004) and Ulrich Bröckling (2007) is not believed to be inclined of developing a political subjectivity capable of collectivising their interests. The discussion on the care of the self literally goes one step back, historically and theoretically.

Self-care is not a widely used terminus technicus in the social and cultural sciences. It is nevertheless a concept which has been made relevant in a number of academic discussions at different times — it is at least a subtext in discussions of intersubjectivity and intentionality, and, on a more general empirical level, individualism and individuation. There are of course ‘classical’ deployments of the terminology. Martin Heidegger has given it a prominent place in the philosophy of ‘Being and Time’, where it is closely linked to temporality and gives a name to the certainty of death, but the in-certainty of its arrival. Feminist philosopher Carol Gilligan gives the term an ethical and intersubjective turn. She used the concept of care in the intention of a critique of the concept of morality and especially Kohlberg’s rationalist concept of moral stages. For her, care is a more apt concept for moral philosophy since it underscores the dependence on others in the making of moral judgements *preceeded* by actions of care.

Michel Foucault is of course an author who has revitalized the concept. The ‘ethical phase’ of his work is amongst other issues dedicated to a genealogical understanding of antique practices and philosophies of ‘cura sui’ and situating them in relation to christian, and thereby more or less contemporary practices of the self. While Volumes two and three of the “history of sexuality” and the lectures on the “hermeneutic of self” are devoted to fleshing out the differences and continuities between heathen and monotheistic practices of self-care, Foucault’s recently published last two lectures (Foucault 2009) exhibit a different concern though, and it will be the one I want to follow: in relating self-care to parrhesia — truth-speaking — it is not so much the overtly political aspects of parrhesia that are in the foreground, but the relation self-care to knowledge itself as a regulation of knowing. My assumption, which I will elaborate, is that Foucault foregrounds self-care as an *event*. Self-care is personal, intersubjective, and singular. It is constantly under threat of being subsumed under pedagogic, scientific or religious discursive practices obscuring its potentialities for the creation of civic culture.

Self-care, understood as a relation of the person to the person, and a *knowing* of oneself, has a foundation in the body. The most elementary form of self-care, can be argued, is the body touching itself. These affectations occur in everyday life: The body touching itself is more than just a movement and less than a gesture. It is, in a way, a gesture directed toward oneself, which does not “communicate” but affects directly: The hand touching the face and the neck, the massaging of an aching stomach, the stroking of cold arms, the play of the fingers with themselves, the shuffling of restless feet. These affections follow the temporality of the body: a churning stomach, a sudden swindle or drowsiness, the sweat on one’s eyebrows, the self-embrace in loneliness. These affectations can be passing and arbitrary or following a great need. Some of them are comforting, when resting one’s head in one’s arms, but they can also propel us into action. Psychoanalysis teaches us that even these very private gestures are recollections and recuperations of motherly, fatherly caresses and embraces and are thus of an interpersonal and social origin. So there are always touches and gestures preceding the self-touches and self-gestures. And these affectation can be *given* to another, to help a child or a friend, or a nervous speaker *to calm their nerves*, to help them cross a barrier or boundary. Self-care in its most elemental form, ‘taught’ to us by others, which enables us to pass it on. It helps cross boundaries and helps in transcending helplessness. It can have a quality of guidance; having been taught what to do and how to cope with fear, loneliness, embarrassment, awkwardness, but also how to ‘feel’ satisfaction, self-love and pride.<sup>2</sup> This bodily grounding of self-care makes apparent that it is always a trace of the *real* or presymbolic, even though we can only experience it in its *imaginary*, e.g. helpful or threatening quality. The urge to reflect on self-care inevitable situates these practices in the *symbolic* order, situating them in discursive strategies. This Lacanian analytic shall not be followed any further here, but it should be kept in mind that an understanding of self-care and care of others as an event, that, even though it occurs frequently in everyday life, bears a trace of the real disturbing the symbolic ordering of the so-called life-world in its ontological conventionality.

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<sup>2</sup> These self-gestures can be read in public spaces as signs of uneasiness, embarrassment or assertiveness and relaxation.

While these elementary, non-discursive forms of self-care<sup>3</sup> should be kept in mind, the practices we will turn to in the following have a more discursive format. The practices and programmatics of self-guidance which were developed in the context of *christian* practices of self-questioning, indicate, for Foucault, documents of an obscurity of the possibility of a non-instrumental intersubjectivity and relation to oneself which is not regulated by a hegemonic scripture. The *cura sui* of Roman antiquity, to briefly mention Foucault's well-known analyses, is a form of knowledge of oneself (2004: 93ff), which extends toward the whole of one's life (Foucault 2004: 111 ff) and thus requires a 'role model' of sorts as a "master of subjectivation" (Foucault 2004: 171f). It is practised in order to enable oneself to care for others — and thereby to become a political subject (224). Foucault suggests that in the "culture de soi" (2004: 216 ff.) of antiquity, non-instrumental intersubjectivities and practices concerned with the self were common, at least in certain social groups, namely in the philosophically inclined upper strata. In these practices, a construction of the self as an object of knowledge and an installation of the self as the ends of the practices arising from this knowledge: "In the practice called the care of the self, we find a absolutisation — excuse the word — of the self as an object of care as well as as an assertion of the self as an end" (Foucault 2004: 226, my translation).

## Self-care and truth

To explain this semantic and practical structure, Foucault develops a complex argument in regard to the relation of writing to events of self-care and care of the other. The complication of his argument is encapsulated in the ambiguity of language as difference, which at once constitutes and obscures experience. The discussion of self-care, thus, could be directed directly towards an interrogation of the theoretical and methodological meaning of the "experientiality" of self-care, as a method or medium of gaining access to shared meanings within intersubjective social relations.<sup>4</sup> I will instead take a detour via the event-character of self-care and its

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<sup>3</sup> Non-discursive not in the absolute sense of *resisting* interpretation, but as preceding interpretation and symbolisation, even though psychoanalysis teaches us that every gesture is always already embedded in the symbolic, albeit often 'a posteriori'.

<sup>4</sup> We find in Foucault's late writing an often implicit discussion of experientiality, leading him back to early themes in his work (Unterthurner 2007).



possible symbolizations, my argument being that the *other* and his acts of care can not be represented in its specificity – ‘Besonderheit’ – if self-care is not unanticipated, and thus able to interrupt the chains of signification constituting experience (Erfahrung). There are a number of vocabularies for expressing the interruption of the smoothness of conventional mundane experience pre-fabricated by the cultural industries and technologies, and with the discussion of self-care in its relation to truth as a qualification of knowledge, I want to further explore one of these vocabularies.

In the following, I claim that Foucault, in his interpretation of ethical practices in antiquity,<sup>5</sup> implicates that self care is an *event*, not a routine. Self-care is not a solipsistic or narcissistic, but an intersubjective and collective, and finally, at its limits, political practice. Whereas the care of the self has the reference to oneself as its object, it is enabled by one-sided or mutual criticism: the other is criticised for entertaining illusions about himself or herself, for not living up to his or her ethical claims. Self-care thus interrupts habits or beliefs entertained about oneself – this is why an act of caring for the self in the sense of creating knowledge of oneself by allowing the intervention of another, a friend or a spiritual teacher, is an event in the sense of an interruption of habit and institutionally legitimated action. Things might not be as they were before after a person is told a truth about oneself which he/she recognizes as the truth. It is precisely in this sense that self-care is closely related to ‘parrhesia’, truth-telling: “We have thus, if I may say so, a whole structure, a whole package of important terms or themes: Care of the self, knowledge of oneself, the art and practise of oneself, relation to the other, being governed by the other and truth-speaking, obligation of telling the truth on the side of this other” (Foucault 2008: 44). Self-care requires the *parrhesia*, the truth-speaking of another: This is risky business, especially when the other person is more powerful than oneself: “I think we have here a scene which is in a way exemplary of parrhesia: A man stands upright in the face of a tyrant and tells him the truth” (Foucault 2008: 49).

Via parrhesia, self-care is endowed with a political dimension. This willingness to *lose control* and to endanger oneself, to trust, even with

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<sup>5</sup> Foucault would like us to understand his analyses as a pre-history to contemporary practices of self-care: „The study of parrhesia and of parrhesiastes in the culture of oneself in antiquity is evidently a kind of prehistory of the practices which are organised and developed afterwards around certain celebrated couples: the sinner and his confessor, the directed and the director of conscience, the mentally ill and the psychiatrist, the patient and the psychoanalyst. It is this prehistory, in a sense, that I have tried“ (Foucault 2009: 9, my translation)

negative outcomes for the one telling his or her truth is part of the notion of parrhesia. This, according to Foucault's analysis, has to do with the fact that the notion of parrhesia has its roots in political practice and the problematisation of democracy, and has only later been "*derived*" into the "sphere of personal ethics" and the "constitution of the moral subject" (Foucault 2009: 10). Parrhesia is, then, the intersubjective and political aspect of self-care and self-knowledge. His writing on self-care restores, in a certain sense, the political and therefore<sup>6</sup> 'eventive' notion of self-care.

Truth-telling as a way of constituting knowledge is not only an experience between two people; a 'third' is often present. This can be an observer or oneself recording what has happened and preserve it 'for' others and posterity. Without this third, who knows how to record and conserve an event, the event 'is' not, cannot be referred to, cannot be located in space and time, cannot become part of a tradition. But the possibility of conserving the event by writing about it is at the same time an impossibility: writing is always writing within a pre-established system of differences, which threaten to obliterate *the* difference made by the event, the trace of the real: Foucault extracts from the descriptions of parrhesia four negative definitions: Parrhesia is not to be conflated with education, neither is it part of rhetoric's, even though 'frankly saying something' can be a simple rhetorical device (Foucault 2008: 51ff). And it is also not a prophetic veridiction, "because the prophet is in a position of mediation. The prophet, by definition, does not speak in his own proper name" (Foucault 2009: 16). The wise person (*le sage*) is typically not a parrhesiast, because he does not speak of issues truly concerning others. These distinctions are not only nominalistic problems or problems of definition; they point to the aforementioned issue, which is the question of writing the event in the empirical languages and language-games that society provides. The *ex negativo* definitions of what parrhesia and self-care are (not) refers to the question of how the parrhesiastic events of self-care are being written down, conserved, and objectified (in a certain sense): Not as pedagogy, not as knowledge, not as prophecy, not as science. Conventionalised, functionalised, in short: objectified discourses do not provide a language for the events of intersubjective self-care which could give expression to their 'transcendence' of economic, pedagogical and scientific problems.<sup>7</sup> To recast the problem in phenomenological

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<sup>6</sup> Insofar as the political and the event are closely interrelated, following Maurice Blanchot (2007).

<sup>7</sup> This position is in no way to doubt the necessity of functionalised communication in law, bureaucracy, economics etc.

terminology: How can the other of self-care *not* act in the anonymity of being a representative of reason, calculus, the law etc. *and* still act as a public person not entirely retreated into the absolute subjectivity of a privatized horizon? The problem is not the absence of individual sense, but the programmatic character of all difference ‘normally’ allowed within normalizing and standardising discourses. Self-care is, insofar as it is an event, a regularly reoccurring exception, following Derrida’s cue, an ‘impossible possibility’ (Derrida 2007) as is the event in general. For Derrida, the event is something not anticipated, and not planned, even though it can be hoped for. He finds in the gift a model or metaphor for the event. The gift loses its quality of being such when a reciprocal gift is expected. The gift then becomes a merely uncompleted act of exchange within the established and economic social conventions of exchange. The same holds true for self-care, if it is conceptualized as an event, which cannot be planned, but which can be enabled by societies, and which they ultimately rely on. The care for oneself and the other continually renews individual and collective powers of sustaining the exchange process, this being a kind of reproductive function, and *inventing* futures, this being a creative function.

Foucault, in his analysis, is concerned with care and self-care, both ways of truth-telling, as being caught up in the totalizing movements of monotheistic control of signification and conduct. Self-care is impossible in a certain sense, as it is dependent on a symbolization, which, at the historical point in time of the establishment of literacy, had already obscured its possibilities, insofar as the *what* of the written is subsumed under programmatic discourses of education, prophecy, and science. At the same time, the event of self-care has to be written as to be intelligible and repeatable, in other words: it needs to be redoubled in writing, to step into social being, to be repeatable and *teachable*. This is the paradox to which Foucault alerts us, a paradox which has to be specified for each epoch of historical and technological development.

It is necessary thus to find a way of writing care and self-care in order for it to become a sustainable form of tradition, which is of course the whole point of theorizing self-care as a practice grounded in certain forms of knowledge. An element of conventionality, of *control*, is inevitable — at least in a sociological perspective. How does control co-constitute self-care? How and when does it endanger self-care?

## Control and Writing

The care of the self, for Foucault, is opposed to or at least endangered by textual technologies of *writing*. Writing connotes control. In this respect he coincides with Max Weber. Bureaucracy, as the dominant form of power in modernity, is mainly ‘aktengestützt’, secured by files, it is a *writing* of events for the purpose of being registered, regulated, and ultimately: governed. Digital media, as a generalized form of writing including grammaticalized sound and image (Kittler 1986). The ubiquity of digital media is also the ubiquity of *writing*, the medium of philosophy and, as Weber reminds us, of bureaucracy. The measuring and valuing of all areas and proceedings of public and private services in our ‘audit culture’ (Power 1997), a special mode of control by writing, which also deploys practices of measurement and calculation and thereby control in individual lives (Traue 2010b). The regulation by *control* is no longer a normative regulation of conduct, but one afforded by the standards of protocol (Galloway 2004), e.g. the criteria of assessment exercises, the templates of social software profiles or the technological infrastructure itself.

This raises the question: Is not every kind of self-care already self-control? Speaking simply: yes, of course. It is the constraint on my action which the other exercises. But who is this other and what are the devices the other deploys in order to constrain my action, and how do I appropriate these devices in order to achieve agency myself? Writing and reading are perhaps the most important cultural techniques of control, which exhibit the interplay between agency and restraint: only if the individual learns to restrain itself in order to read and write can it transcend the situative pulls and pushes of the situation. But then there is also the kind of meta-control which literacy, or rather, the process of becoming literate exerts, in conjunction with hegemonial knowledge; this is the kind of control Althusser has famously called the effect of ‘ideological state apparatuses’.

I will argue that the problem of self-care is essentially one of the ambiguity of writing as intersubjective practice relieved from everyday pressures, (or ‘skhole’, to use Bourdieu’s term) on the one hand, and as government on the other. Care is a prerequisite, a medium of individuation and socialization, but it can be functionalized, by replacing it with techniques of care-lessness manufactured in the cultural industries, or by individualising it in practices of governing and thus stripping it of its

intersubjective dimensions. But self-care and parrhesia, as the most eminent mode of care of the other, is never outside of language, is never purely event, or if we assumed it were, we would draw closer to a discourse such as that of Emmanuel Levinas,<sup>8</sup> which has, in this case, the disadvantage of not lending itself to a sociological analysis of linguistic and societal institutions in the midst of a media rupture.

Foucault does not ignore the issue of writing in regard to the care of the self: he states an irreducible relation between regimes of “veridiction”<sup>9</sup> and self-care:

I want to pose [the question concerning the relation between veridiction and the governing of the subject] in regard to the form and in the frame of the constitution of a relation to oneself, in order to demonstrate, how in this relation to oneself a certain type of self-experience evolved which I find characteristic for occidental experience, for the occidental experience of oneself, but also for the occidental experience, which the subject can have or make up of the others (Foucault 2004: 289, my translation).

The orders of knowledge which are established in a certain society or polity, then, guide our experience, and that of us and of others. Foucault is not explicitly concerned with extending his analyses to the present, but he gives examples which lend themselves to such an extension: In antique ascetic and gymnastic practices, he finds the form of lists, or rather: double lists of things which are useful or useless to know (Foucault 2004: 292). These lists serve as a programmatic guideline for the exercise of

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<sup>8</sup> Levinas characterises the relation to the other as being related to in the ‘accusative’, as in the grammatical mode.

<sup>9</sup> The term is defined, apart from paragraphs in the Lecture on the ‘Hermeneutic of the Subject’ which I will refer to later, in two Texts: M. Foucault (2001): *Dits et Ecrits*, Nr. 278, and Nr. 345, where veridiction is defined as follows: „In summary, the critical history of thought is neither a history of the progress of knowledge nor of a clouding of knowledge; it is the history of the emergence of games of truth: it is the history of „veridictions“, understood as the forms according to which, regarding to a specific domain of objects, discourses are articulated which are susceptible to being true or false speech: which were the conditions of this emergence, which was the price which has in a certain manner been paid for it, which are its effects on the real and the manner in which, by linking a certain type of object to certain modalities of the subject, it has constituted, for a duration, a space and the individuals endowed with the historical a priori of a possible experience“ [1451, my translation].

self-care; one should care about oneself in such a way that the useful knowledge is increased, and the useless knowledge is left aside. The experience of individuals is then such is the underlying hypothesis, shaped by this knowledge-based privileging of certain objects and modes of knowing. Self-care, we can conclude, requires the application of regimes of veridiction to one's lifestyles, including of course labor relations, family life, political life, and communal life. But Foucault's treatment of the relation between veridiction as an institutionalized system of writing and care remains cursory, even though he makes some programmatic comments about it in his 1983 article "Ecriture de soi" (Writing of the Self), where he asserts that writing means "showing oneself", "making appear" one's own face before another's (Foucault 2001:1244). Writing, in practices of care and self-care, especially in practices of correspondence, does not serve to decipher the self, generate knowledge about it, but to open oneself toward the other. But how these writing practices, as element of the practice of friendship or counseling, are related to the *regimes* of veridiction is largely ignored in Foucault's work.<sup>10</sup>

Today's regimes of veridiction are increasingly based on digital writing, and thus, I will argue, on media of *control* in a Deleuzian sense (Deleuze 1992). The remainder of the article will be devoted to spelling out some of the consequences of this for self-care in contemporary societies.

Control is, regarding the semantic and material origin of the term, founded in the knowledge of cybernetics and, regarding its material basis, in 'informatics', or computer technology. Cybernetics emerges in the 1940s as an interdisciplinary scientific and engineerial discipline. The cooperation between mathematicians, biologists, engineers, sociologists, psychologists, and members of other disciplines who meet during the famous Macy conferences yields a rearticulation of anthropology: the difference between the organism and the machine is flattened in the theory of feedback and self-organization.

Cybernetics had from the 1970s onward spread into a number of practitioner's fields, including therapy (Traue 2010b). The German historian of cybernetics Stefan Rieger holds that it is the appreciation of the moving image which organizes the discourse and the techniques of cybernetics. Cybernetics is about "Bewegungsbildsteuerung", i. e. control of the moving image, mental and videotechnological. Rieger demonstrates

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<sup>10</sup> Stiegler comes to a similar conclusion regarding Foucault's treatment of writing (Stiegler 2008).

that the projection of action into the future by organisms is conceived to be guided by images. At the same time, cyberneticians developed technical implementations for machines 'which store, compute and transmit data including image and sound. This notion of life migrated into therapeutics in the 1970s and ten years later into the professional world of corporate therapy (Traue 2010b). These are findings based on a discourse analysis of therapy manuals from the late 1800s to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and on interviews with coaches and other corporate and alternative therapists. In recent practices of therapy and counseling deriving from 'cybernetic therapeutics' hermeneutic and narrative confessional practices are supplemented or replaced by practices of visualisation and the seeking and controlling of 'feedback' in the sense of approval and commentary. The cybernetic, enterprising, and visual technologies model the self by 'imitations' of memory and intersubjectivity by digital and audiovisual media. As self-relations mediated by 'interpassivity', i.e. the reliance on the presence of media, they allow for post-institutional (with Haraway: cyborgian) types of self-reliance – whether they constitute forms of care or carelessness needs to be discussed. One explanation for this is that the subject position accorded to the cybernetic self is one of an observer, of somebody watching himself perform under the eyes of video-technologies (including the video-technologically trained human eye). The media historian Bernard Siegert states:

It is not a matter of man disappearing but of having to define, in the wake of the epistemic ruptures brought about by first- and second-order cybernetics, noise and message relative to the unstable position of an observer (Siegert 2006: 43).

I want to argue that *control*, not in the everyday sense of surveillance or domination, but in a Deleuzian and Eliasian sense, since Elias has a notion of control loops, is the extension of mastery of nature to mastery of the living by installing loops of measurement and visibility, rendering the life processes of life visible to the living itself. Control is thus more closely related to self-care than *simpler grammatical* forms of domination, such as codified rules, since it can register and modulate the rhythms of life processes, the ontological difference between care and control being that control has its purpose in the stabilisation of processes, whereas self-care finds its purpose in a transformation of processes. But control as the guidance of the living through apparatuses and media of registration and modulation has become a constitutive structure of contemporary socialisation and individuation:

The subject presents itself, and it documents itself *as itself*, a structural condition of contemporary subjectivity the German sociologist Hubert Knoblauch has called “double subjectivation” (Knoblauch 2009). It not only presents itself to others within in social spaces; but it presents itself within the media deployed for this presentation, being aware of the constructive nature of these media. Far from displaying any naive or natural social behaviour, it engages with its representations of itself by invoking, utilizing and sometimes withdrawing from the regimes of visibilities and veridiction.

In the dispositifs of consulting and coaching, and more general, in postfordist regimes of labour, a double moment of knowledge generation installs itself: it allows the individual to be seen and at the same time prompts it to present and document itself. This presentation of self and its traces in writing (in cv’s, work biographies, ‘partnership biographies’ etc.) are visible to emotionally relevant others, gatekeepers and often even a general public. The more this structure of communication and visibility is *looped*, i.e. its results being ‘fed back’ to the individual ego, the more operations on oneself a person is prompted to perform. Yet, of course, the more of an everyday quality the attainment of knowledge about oneself attains, the more areas of life it will encompass.

The lifestyles of individuals and the writing systems of feedback structures adapt to each other: bodies, territories, identities and actions are captured and fixed in writing at an ever higher temporal and spatial resolution. The subject does not remain blind to these intensifications of data streams, but contrarily develops skills of adapting itself to this condition.

### **Conclusion: Self-care and systems of care in contemporary ‘governmediality’**

Following Foucault’s discussion of self-care and parrhesia, I argued for a reading of self-care as *event*. It has become apparent that the ambiguity at the heart of the discourse on *narcissism* has become accessible through Foucault’s discussion of the notion of *cura sui*, care of the self. The event of self-care cannot be planned or controlled, but it is necessary conditions for individuation and thus the adaptation of societies to their technological and ethical challenges. The tendency of self-care to recede into narcissism is disturbed by the rupture which parrhesia, truth-telling, introduces into these practices. Parrhesia, however, is a precarious option in modernised



societies: the seat of power is in a certain sense vacant in advanced technological societies, since the politics of „there is no alternative” (Margaret Thatcher’s famous catchphrase) depersonalises and de-systematises power. Speaking the truth today has always to consider the forms in which any hypothetical truth said can escape its being disarmed in the spectacle of opinions and discourses.

The predominance of digital media – which inform communicative action and shape subjectivation processes in contemporary societies – intensifies communications which are necessary for practices of self-care. But these same media limit the possibilities of care by establishing subject positions of observation and self-observation. These subject positions are dispersed and installed via therapeutic practices and the strategies of mass media. Such a diagnosis should not, however, neglect that the increased performativity of automedial practices, i.e. the presentation of oneself as a performing body, allows for and provokes mistakes, failures and breakdowns of prescribed and normative modes of representation. What does the informatisation and visualisation of the self in digital culture imply for the ‘impossible possibility’ of self-care?

I argued that the care of the self is inherently a mode of letting oneself be observed by others, and that this observation can be *coupled to* systems of control such as evaluation regimes and regimes of writing the self. The qualitative difference between ‘caring control’ and ‘cybernetic control’ is that care (in the sense of *cura sui*) is retroactive; it occurs as a reinforcement or criticism of action after it has happened. Cybernetic control is pro-active; it attempts to determine or influence behaviour of populations in advance. The media ruptures and social changes of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century have changed the terrain for the constitution of the subject. Drawing from the technologies of control mentioned, there are three main ambivalences surrounding the question of the conditions of self-care in a substantial sense laid out by Foucault:

Firstly, we can observe a proliferation of techniques of imagining personal futures and communicating them to others: creativity techniques, project work and therapy are examples for these techniques of vision. But these futures are often short-sighted and lack a foundation in experience, especially the historical experience afforded by intergenerational processes.

Secondly, individuals are offered increased possibilities for presenting, documenting, and writing themselves. Media theorist Christoph Engemann and refer to this governing by providing writing media ‘governmediality’ (Engemann 2010, Traue 2010a). Certain classes have certainly been ‘writing themselves’ since the beginning of Bourgeois society and in conjunction with cultural movements as romanticism. But contemporary digital self-writing is available to almost all classes (in the global North), and it occurs largely in the context of pre-fabricated protocols which personnel management, e-government and marketing provide. The programme *industries* have thus successfully wrested control over a significant share of self-writing from the programme institutions (such as schools and universities). Yet, the state remains an important provider of authentication media such as passports, certificates and digital signatures (Engemann 2010). Thirdly, in cognitive capitalism, individuals feel the desire to be vital and expressive. Subjects thus develop “passionate attachments” (Butler 1997) to the symbolisations of expressivity and vitality, even if they traumatise the subject which is unable to live up to the standards of vitality and creativity. In conjunction with this ‘cult of creativity’ is an attachment to the quasi-caring of service work. The ‘entmployee’ is less concerned with the exploitation of his labor force because his or her labor always has a strong use-value component, when dealing with customers or co-workers. In a certain sense, care for others and oneself is a structural element of post-fordistic service economies, only that care is constantly subordinated to performance.

How can contemporary society process these contradictions and ambivalences? Of course, there is in most critical academic writing a certain sense of pessimism—which is entirely justified. The German sociologist Ulrich Bröckling (2007) attempts to identify lines of flight from the imperatives of the enterprising self; he comes up with three strategies: ‘depression’, ‘ironicism’, and ‘passive resistance’. These are strategies of temporary and partial withdrawal from deregulated, individualized labor and dispositifs of electronic government. But they hardly offer any social or political perspective for a democratisation of control and an autonomising culture of care and self-care, as he concedes. The difficulty is, in his words, to be “different differently” in the context of a capitalistic culture in which “being different” is a central requisite of innovation.

Bernard Stiegler offers an other, carefully optimistic outlook, based on an analysis of the relationship between consciousness and Technology. He

understands *media* as ‘pharmakon’, as remedy *and* poison: “Thus, a pharmacological analysis<sup>11</sup> is required to elaborate a therapeutic prescription — a system of care, i.e. a social and economic organization deriving from a political decision. But to the contrary, as anticipated by Antonio Gramsci, the cultural hegemony, while making believe that political decisions are no longer possible — “there is no alternative” — because politics has been absorbed by the market and the economy. This happens precisely through psycho-power subordinating the time of available brains to the pure law of merchandise. But Gramsci’s concept is not sufficient for imagining either grammatization or its pharmacological dimension, or the therapeutics of which a new politics should exist” (Stiegler 2009: 47). For him, the question is “how the discretization [i.e. the digitalisation of communication, B.T.] can be curative” and which the political, cultural and industrial conditions of such a care are (ibid: 48). The discretisation of communication afforded by cybernetic technologies, with its increasing delegation of agency to lay actors may replace the exhausted Fordist model of labour and consumerism — if the technologies are appropriated with a vision of solidarity which can do *without* pre-established collectives of interest and *without* a common enemy (such as a cultural industry with its normalizing interpellations and its installations of interpassivity). It is up for us to fight for systems of care and self-care which avoid being functionalised in contexts of ‘activating’ labour policies, which resist the transformation into means of social distinction, and which allow the formation of personal and political relations mediated by new technologies out of which we can create new agencies. These ‘systems of care’—such as schools, inner-city neighborhoods, families, and social movements—are ‘technologies of the we’ which allow the distinction between I, you and we to be rearticulated continually, avoiding the disorientations of narcissism.

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<sup>11</sup> By “pharmacological”, Stiegler refers to Derrida’s usage of the term, who refers to *pharmakon* — following the etymology — as both poison and cure. In Derrida’s interpretation of Platon, *writing* is the *pharmakon*, whereas Stiegler generalises the term to technologies and techniques in general.

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